

Unsportsmanlike Conduct

[by Scott Westerfeld](#)

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There's a lot you can fit into a 851-gram teleport.

Lean beef is about two-thirds water, so more than two-and-a-half kilos of ground chuck can be reconstituted from a transport that size. Enough for twenty-nine decent hamburgers, for every human being on the planet. For fixings we had lettuce and plenty of soybread, and tomatoes were bigger than golf balls that second year on Tau.

Alternatively, each member of the colony could have received a seven-page letter. No text or camfeeds, but actual pieces of paper touched by our loved ones, marked with tactile incisions of the pen. (And try spraying perfume on a textfile.)

With 851 grams of hops pellets, we could have produced about 2,000 liters of homebrew. We had our own sugar and malt, but they'd never given us seed crop for hops, to make sure we couldn't drink more beer than Houston decreed.

Or, for a truly exotic experience, three medium-sized oranges would have massed about the same. Not dehydrated, pre-juiced, or even peeled. Just the real things smelling of an early summer's hard sunlight. We had a tiny anti-scurvy orchard, of course. But our starship had brought only fast-growing limes, our oldest trees four feet tall and delivering a small, bitter fruit.

None of these items were in the transport, however. We had voted. With one annoyed abstention, the choice had been made.

The tube glowed, scattering its weird light through the shed. The familiar room turned eerie around us, bent like the colors of an Oklahoma landscape just before a tornado folds its shape overhead. Seven light-years away in the packed suburbs of Houston, lights dimmed as air-conditioning faltered as a grid serving fourteen million was poached. This torrent of power crowded its way into some unthinkably long and narrow channel of the quantum that led to 851 grams of matter riding the wave.

When the tube light faded, we all stood blinking.

I popped the clean-seal, which hissed at me as vacuum equalized, but waited a moment before opening it. My instincts insisted that the transport would still be hot to the touch inside, however ridiculous that notion was. And worse, if the squirt had blown, we'd all wasted weeks of mass allowance on a pile of splinters.

But the transport had come in clean. I lifted it up for Alex and Yoshi to admire.

"Beautiful," Yoshi said.

"Much better than my old one." Alex was right. The thirty-ounce Louisville Slugger felt much sweeter than our broken bat. The long, wide grain of the wood showed the considerable age of the ash tree from which it had been hewn. The finish lent it an emerald gleam in the antiseptic lights of the clean shed, and it hefted like a feather in my hand.

Of course, our pals back on Earth wouldn't have sent us anything but the best. The price of a solid-gold bat wouldn't approach the energy costs of a 851-gram transport.

Still, this Slugger was a beauty.

Yoshi took it gingerly from my hands, a look of relief on his face. It had been his wild swing that had cracked the first one two weeks before, reducing it to the two most expensive pieces of firewood in human history, leaving us without the game.

Alex patted him on the shoulder, all forgiven now. The old bat, nine gloves, and six baseballs had comprised her entire personal mass allowance on the starship out, and had proven the most popular contribution to the public good. (With the possible exception of Ian Claymore's micro-still.)

Alex took the bat from Yoshi, stepped back, and took a practice swing. She grinned like a kid on her birthday.

"Let's play some ball."

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Half an hour later, we had two teams out on the field.

Our baseball field was a medium-age impact crater full of sheetgrass, basically flat if you ignored the low, concentric ripples emanating from the natural pitcher's mound in its exact center. The home-run "fence" was a ring of chalky two-meter cliffs at the crater's edge, reachable even by amateurs like us thanks to Tau's nine-five gravity. The sheetgrass surface was impeccable, tractable, soft in a fall, quick-drying after the heavy Coriolis rains which swept across us every afternoon: the best of astroturf and earthly grass combined.

Of course, sheetgrass wasn't grass in any botanical sense, but a genetically identical colony of cilia that acted as water filtration system for the composite organism that filled the crater. In a way, we owed our presence here on Tau to the rain-catch organisms. They accounted for most of the biomass of the planet, and thus most of the rich oil field below our feet had once been sheetgrass or some ancient relative.

It had been two weeks (six Tau-day microlunar months, actually, a bit over a hundred hours each) since Yoshi's swing had snapped our old bat and brought baseball on the plane

a halt. It hadn't taken much arm-twisting to get two enthusiastic teams of nine onto the field. There were even a few human spectators in addition to the usual audience of Taus.

"Looks like pretty good attendance today, Doctor."

"I count sixty-seven." Dr. Helene Chirac lifted her tablet and peered at the screen. "That beats the previous record by five."

"Think they missed it, Doc?"

"It seems likely they noticed our absence on the field."

As always, Dr. Chirac was our umpire. (With seventeen PhDs and three MDs between them, that title was usually ignored, but something about the gray-haired, imperiously formal Dr. Chirac made it unavoidable.) As head of the xeno team, she had attended every game since Taus had started watching, hoping that her elusive linguistic breakthrough might be found here on the field.

Other than becoming baseball fans, the Taus didn't have much to do with us. No Tau had ever set foot on the land we'd developed, steering well clear of the camp, solar array, drill site, and farmland. Whether it was out of respect for our claims or fear of contagion, we didn't know. Like good spectators, they stayed at the edge of the baseball field. And when the odd home run came their way, they always scattered to let one of us retrieve the ball.

The rest of the xeno team were biologists and could work with other life-forms or long-distance observations. But Dr. Chirac, a linguist, needed face-to-face contact with the dominant species. Umping baseball was as close as she got.

Our Tau fans were definitely learning the game. They knew when to cheer now. They showed no favoritism, making their characteristic stuck-pig squeals on tough catches as well as long drives, and a few were clapping as my team took the field for the top of the first inning. They were finally starting to get some sound out of those big, soft hands. I waved to them as they took the mound.

My opposing captain was at the plate. Two full ranks my junior, Alex really was a captain, as well as our pilot for the landing two years before, company meteorologist, and damn fine cajun cook.

"Seven innings?" she shouted, swinging the bat with pleasure. She didn't usually lead off the order, but rank hath its privileges.

I looked at the angle of the reddish sun. Plenty of afternoon left. We were taking off an extra half-day in honor of our new bat, and to celebrate our latest pipeline milestone, which we'd reached ahead of schedule. Probably a longer game would tire everyone out for a good night's sleep. Morale needed a boost, I figured.

"Let's go for nine," I called.

Alex gave me a questioning look.

I nodded. "That's right. Cancel the late shift. It's a beer night."

"You got it, Colonel." She stepped into the batter's box. "Doctor?"

Dr. Chirac completed a sweep with her tablet, with which she'd been snapping pictures of our alien audience, and nodded curtly. "Play ball."

I took a deep breath, slapping our best baseball into the worn pocket of my glove. The ritual begun, I cracked my neck on both sides with a dip of each shoulder, squinted at Yoshida at first and McGill at third, tugged aside my filter mask and spat, then licked my lips once from right to left.

Wound up.

And threw. A bit low and to the left.

"Ball one!" Dr. Chirac shouted in her familiar way, loud enough to carry to the alien observers. The xenos weren't quite sure of the Taus' hearing range yet, but Chirac called the game at high volume, introducing minimal variation in baseball's signs and signifiers. The more consistent she was, the easier it would be for the Tau to learn the patterns of the game. She stepped back, folding her arms to gaze at the audience as she did between each pitch.

Hunter returned the ball to me. I cracked my neck again, checked the bases, and licked my lips. He gave me two fingers down, to which I nodded. Alex couldn't stand up to my fastball.

I wound up, pitched it in hard. Swing and a crack, straight up or just about. I ran a few steps forward, but Hunter sprang up and waved me off, taking the catch.

The humans in the field raised a ragged cheer, echoed by the high-pitched hooting of the Taus.

"How'd she feel?" I yelled to Alex as she trudged back from halfway to first base.

She laughed. "What, are baseball bats feminine now?"

"That one is."

Alex picked it up from where it had flown from her grasp and ran her fingers down its length. "Maybe you're right. She's pretty sweet."

"Don't ask, don't tell, Captain." I smiled, mentally moving myself to the top of my team's order, and returned to the mound.

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The game went long, and our shadows lengthened, then doubled as Antipodes rose, full as it was every weekend. Like most small-town baseball games, ours was a dramatic affair, the score padded by overthrows, dropped catches, and stolen bases. By the bottom of the ninth, the teams were tied at twelve runs apiece.

"Come on guys, extra innings," Alex shouted as her team took the field.

"No way. Let's wrap this up," I exhorted my own troops.

The Taus seemed to have caught the growing tension. They'd been agitated since the end of the seventh. I wondered if they'd noticed we were playing a couple of more innings than usual.

No one knew how smart the Taus were. They were definitely tool-users well into the agricultural revolution, planting their ferny staple plants with stick hoes and fending off large predators collectively, using spears and slings and a lot of hooting. According to some of our Earthbound theorists, their social rituals were about as advanced as humans at the beginning of language development, although Dr. Chirac always warned me about making comparisons. Their repertoire of vocal noises sounded awfully sophisticated to me, and fully half of it was too high for human hearing.

My job had little to do with contact, of course. Our mission priority was getting the pipeline up, never mind the local environment and culture, intelligent or not. With a global population of about a hundred thousand Taus, we weren't exactly crowding them. And they had no use for the oil we were stealing, anyway. Maybe twenty thousand years from now they'd miss it. But I figured we were doing them a favor. We'd leave them enough accessible oil for the short run at internal combustion, but not enough to fuck their planet as thoroughly as we had our own.

In the meantime, Earth's billions needed oil for plastics, our ancestors having apparently forgotten that petroleum is useful for things other than burning. And of course the U.S. needed another few decades of cheap gas and big cars to complete our conversion.

Hunter went in and hit a single, and got a big cheer from the Taus. I wondered for a moment if our alien audience knew the score was tied.

"The natives are restless," a voice behind me observed.

"I didn't know you were watching, Ashley. Thought you didn't approve."

Ashley Newkirk shrugged. "A base imitation of the mother game, without subtlety or grace."

"Aye, but at least it doesnae take five days." Iain Claymore was another abstainer from baseball, and physical activity in general, but was happy to take any side against Ashley. The two Brits were on the xeno team, like all of the non-Americans in the colony, but were strict

horticulturists. They had little to do with the dominant species, too busy observing how our invader species were affecting the local flora.

"One day you must tell me the rules again," I said, praying he would ignore the offer. Ashley had once tried to reveal the mysteries of cricket to me, but his explanation turned to apoplexy every time I made an analogy to baseball. In his mind, any query that compared the two was like asking of Rembrandt's painting: "Interior or exterior?"

Jenny Flagg was up next. She had once been a reliable single, specializing in Texas-leaguers that landed just behind the shortstop. The problem was, after two years everybody knew her one trick. The outfield moved in.

The first pitch flew past her wild swing. She was looking to hit it hard, trying to force fielders deep. They didn't buy it.

"Strike one!" Dr. Chirac declaimed. If nothing else, the Taus would probably learn to count to three.

"Jenny!" I made a calming gesture with my hands. With the score tied, all we needed was her usual single.

She nodded, took a less aggressive stance.

But she slashed again at the next pitch, a drive that flew high over second base, clearing the center fielder's outstretched glove by centimeters. Jenny ran a leisurely double while Hunter pounded home.

"That's the ball game!" Dr. Chirac shouted. The Taus cheered.

The field jogged desultorily in. Our team gathered around Hunter and Jenny, providing Taus a textbook example of a human victory celebration.

"The beer's on me," I announced, then turned to Jenny. "But I should have you up on insubordination charges, Sergeant Flagg."

She shrugged as we headed back toward camp. "I thought you and I were engaged in a subtle deception, Colonel."

I laughed. "At least now you'll get a little respect for your long ball—"

"Colonel!"

I turned at the shout. Dr. Chirac still stood at home plate, transfixed and staring into the outfield.

A small party of Taus was approaching.

I signalled for everyone to stop where they were and walked with quick, even steps to Chirac's side.

"Sweet Jesus," I said. They were armed, as always, slings at the ready around their necks. Over the last two years, we'd cleared the field of rocks pretty thoroughly, but the Tau could be deadly with improvised projectiles. I was more awed than worried, though. This was the first time they'd entered the human colony.

"They look friendly, I guess."

"Don't you see it?" Chirac was breathing hard, her tablet making the small reminder beep that indicated high-memory motion capture.

"See what?"

"There are nine of them."

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They didn't want gloves.

That made sense, at least. Their big hands were already baseball glove-sized. It had crossed my mind to wonder once or twice if that's why they watched the game. We must have looked a bit more Tau-like with brown leather webbing our fingers.

As Dr. Chirac quickly briefed me, I realized that she was in command for the next couple of hours. At long last, we were in a contact situation.

"Keep the winning team playing, in the same positions for consistency. Play nine innings no matter how dark it gets. Go along with any call I make, however strange."

"Thinking of cheating, Doc?"

"Absolutely not, but I may have to adapt the rules a bit. With their body structure, it's going to be a small strike zone. Go easy on them, but play to win. And for god's sake don't hurt anyone. Any questions?"

"Just one."

"What?"

"Are we the visitors or the home team?"

She nodded. "Interesting. It's our field, but their planet. Still, they won't be aware of the distinction, given that we haven't had any visiting teams lately. Let them bat first."

I was glad Dr. Chirac had chosen who would play. Everyone wanted to be in the first interspecies baseball game.

Contact had been one of our mission parameters from the beginning, but after the excitement of finding Tau inhabited, two years of being snubbed by the natives had left those of us in the military and construction side feeling left out of the explorers' club. But the old excitement came back quickly. The news spread through handcom calls, and before the game had started the entire human population of Tau was in attendance. Yoshi and the rest of the xeno team frantically mounted fixed cameras to record the game.

"Play ball!" Dr. Chirac shouted as I took the mound.

I faced the Tau at bat, preparing myself to throw the first interspecies pitch in baseball history.

She (a ninety-percent chance with Taus) was gripping the Slugger with her two sling hands, shifting her weight on the other four like a restive batter. The two mid-hands popped occasionally to scratch her thorax and stroke the bat.

They had been watching us closely. One of the Tau's sling hands let go of the bat for a moment to touch its brow, as if adjusting an invisible cap.

I dipped my shoulders one by one, getting a pair of good cracks from my neck, hoping my arm would stay in the game for nine more innings. Checked first and third, spat, and licked lips.

The creature in front of me didn't look ready for a fastball. For a first-time batter, she didn't seem utterly clueless, but she held the bat a bit too far back, as if stuck in the wind-up of a swing.

I threw at a nice, easy speed.

Like many first balls of new seasons, it was not a great pitch, dipping low enough that Hunter had to scoop it up from the dirt. But the Tau gamely swung, missing by a country mile. (Or, as Chirac's tablet recorded, a good forty centimeters.)

I saw Dr. Chirac hesitate before she called, "Strike one!" Her eyes narrowed a bit above her filter mask, as if thinking I'd thrown an unhittable ball on purpose.

I shrugged as it flew back to me.

My second pitch tightened up and went in right at thorax level, where the Tau's first swing had passed over the plate. She swung and missed again, low this time, but closer.

"Strike two!"

The ball came back from Hunter, who yelled his usual, "You got her now, Colonel!"

I smiled at Hunter's attitude. It wasn't like the Tau were going to walk in here and win the game off us. We had to assume this was as much about contact for them as it was for us. They might as well get a real baseball experience.

Hunter flashed me two fingers down, and I nodded.

After nine innings, my fastball isn't exactly scorching, but it ain't bad for an old man's. I laid the ball straight into Hunter's glove, and the Tau batter swung late by a solid second.

"Strike three!" Chirac called, and cocked her thumb for the Tau to go.

There was dead silence for a moment. Did she know she was out? Had my fastball constituted humanity's first interstellar diplomatic blunder?

The batter hung its head, rested the Slugger on its abdomen, and trudged back toward the other Taus clustered to the right of home plate.

Hunter started the cheer. "Way to go, Colonel!" He clapped and whistled. The remaining humans and the Taus around the field joined in. When the batter got back to her teammates, they put up their sling hands to pat her head softly, almost like a team high-fiving each other.

I looked at Dr. Chirac, who was recording the display. They apparently knew the rules, at least the basics. Over a year or so of watching the game, the Tau had learned some baseball.

It occurred to me that of everything we had accomplished here—prospecting for oil, building a solar array to power the tube, planting the farm, drinking and fighting with (and screwing) each other—this game was our only real collective ritual.

Our colony had no common religion. The small group that had once held Mass had dwindled due to a schism: Some wanted to observe every seven Tau days, some every lunar week, others to match Earth Sundays. As a result, any prayers nowadays were pretty much done in private. After a few weeks on-planet, I'd let the military protocol loosen. There were only seven of us who were U.S. Army, so I saw little point in raising the flag every morning. Even our work schedules were erratic. Everyone adapted differently to the eighteen-hour day, and McGill and I let our people change their shifts when Tau-lag left them sleepless in the planet's long twilit night.

To the Tau, we must have seemed an unruly lot, chaotic and unpredictable. But in baseball we had found ritual and ceremony, a focus that brought us—the twenty Americans, four Japanese, two Cubans, and our French umpire, at least—together.

So perhaps it didn't matter if the Tau never got a hit.

It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.

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Three up, three down.

The top of the Tau order only got the bat on the ball once, producing a foul tip that went over Hunter's head. For a moment, I wondered if the batter would mistakenly run, but she knew it had gone foul and just eased onto her back four, waiting as Hunter chased it down. Then she struck out swinging on the next pitch.

We were up.

"Jenny," I called as we came off the field. "You go in first."

"And do what, Colonel?"

I shrugged. "Chirac says play to win. But no dangerous line drives. And don't argue with the doctor's calls."

"Can they even pitch?"

"I guess we'll find out. They're pretty good with those slings, though."

I could see Jenny's lips purse even through her filter mask. "Deadly, actually." We'd seen them take down the local predators at a hundred meters with a fusillade of rocks the size of human fists.

"Relax, Jenny. So far they seem to know the rules. I don't think they're suddenly going to throw beanballs at us."

"Wish I had a batter's helmet, just in case the pitcher pulls out her sling."

I looked back at the Taus. They were throwing the ball to each other, warming up like humans taking the field. They had adapted their sling technique to a throw, like an underarm pitch tilted forty-five degrees.

"You'll be okay." I patted Jenny's shoulder and jogged over to join Yoshi by one of the cameras.

"They're throwing pretty good."

He nodded, following the ball with the camera headsup, a zoomed-in view on a translucent layer over his face.

"I've seen the kids toss rocks like this," he said. "My guess is that it's the original behavior that the sling was adapted to augment."

"They used to hunt barehanded?"

"They're built for it." Yoshi sent me a headsup. He had some software running that interpolated Tau skeletal structure. (Conveniently, the Tau practiced ritual exposure after death. Given that carrion-eaters usually dragged away the corpse, we figured an autopsy wouldn't stretch the bounds of cultural sensitivity.) As the Tau with the ball wound up, I watched the compound socket that allowed her arm smooth 360-degree rotation. She was f

more fluid than a human throwing underarm. Faster, too.

I wondered if Jenny was really safe. These guys were built to throw.

The Tau team had managed a pretty fair imitation of our field placings, and when the a on the mound raised a hand, another slung the ball to her.

Jenny hefted the bat and walked up to the plate, and my jaw dropped.

"Did you see that, Yoshi?"

"Well, I guess they can tell us apart," he said quietly.

The outfielders had moved in, covering the ground where Jenny's Texas-leaguers tend land.

"The question is," Yoshi said, "do they really understand Jenny's hitting style, or are they just imitating our strategy?"

"Good point. Remember, she got a hit by going deep last game."

"Barely," Yoshi muttered. Then I remembered that he'd been the one in center field for Jenny's last at-bat.

She knocked the dust from her shoes and stood at the ready, glancing at the Tau playing catcher. It was the closest any of us had actually gotten to the dominant life form before today. Just behind the catcher, Dr. Chirac looked ecstatic.

"Play ball!" she shouted.

The Tau started to jitter on the mound, some sort of pre-pitch dance. She finished with a jerk of the head accompanied by a little coughing noise. I heard a giggle from my team, which spread throughout the humans.

"Well, Colonel," said Yoshi, "she's got you cold."

I blinked, then saw it: The little dance had been an imitation of my wind-up ritual. She bobbed her shoulders one by one, checked the bases, then spat on the ground. No doubt she would have licked her lips if she'd had a tongue.

Of course, as far as the Tau knew, it was in the *rules* that you had to spit before you pitched. All four humans who regularly spent time on the mound had a tendency to do so. As observers, the Tau had the classic problem of a small sample size: They couldn't distinguish between the explicit laws of the game, its long-held traditions, and the personal habits of the few players they'd seen.

Jenny readied herself, and the first pitch came at her. It was low and outside, but she stepped back nervously. The pitch had looked tentative to me, slower than they'd been throwing in the outfield. Hopefully, that meant the Tau were trying not to hurt us.

The catcher scooped it in effortlessly and tossed it back with a high, arcing throw, an imitation of Hunter's returns.

"Ball one!" Chirac called, focused on her tablet as the pitcher warmed up again. The humans around me tittered again as the alien performed its little pantomime of me.

"Can't wait to get a sample of that fresh saliva," Yoshi said.

"Well, at least I've made one contribution to science," I said.

The second pitch got a little closer to the plate; I reckoned it was between knees and crotch but still outside. Chirac called another ball.

Jenny looked more confident now. The outside pitches seemed cautious to a fault, and when the third came almost within reach, she leaned forward across home plate and took a swing at it.

The ball smacked off down the first-base line. Jenny started to run, but checked herself when it drifted foul. The Tau playing first base managed to get in front of the ball, but didn't get his hands low enough. It bounced off the hard abdominal carapace and rolled toward Yoshi and me.

I scooped it up.

"Is she okay?" I said softly.

"Sure," Yoshi said. "They're tough. As long as we don't hit one in the head."

I tossed the ball softly to the first baseman, then looked down at my hand. I'd touched a ball that had been touched by an alien. Not since my boots had first planted themselves on Tau soil had I felt such an otherworldly thrill.

"Strike one!" called Chirac, nodding approvingly.

From then on, Jenny gamely tried to get a hit, managing to strike out chasing the errant pitches. The Tau on the mound was getting better, but she still was about as accurate as a little-leaguer. At least she was throwing faster, apparently confident that she wouldn't kill anyone.

"Sorry, Coach," Jenny said, "but I didn't want to get walked, you know?"

"That was fine, Sergeant. We're all playing it by ear."

The other human batters followed Jenny's lead, swinging at whatever the Tau pitcher could get to them. But she was too fast and wild. For the next few innings, strike-out followed strike-out for both teams.

"I wonder if we're teaching them bad baseball," Yoshi said. "I mean, shouldn't we take a walk at some point?"

I shrugged. "All in good time. Maybe she'll throw some strikes one of these days."

In the fourth inning, with two down, Hunter got a hit. He connected off a low, straight fastball that popped into short left field. A human probably would have caught it, but the Taus aren't very fast on their feet. The alien fielder collected it on one bounce and slung it toward first base, where Hunter was already camped out.

After the frustrations of the early innings, we cheered him loudly, joined by the Taus in the audience, who apparently weren't taking sides.

"Very cricket of them," Ashley Newkirk said approvingly.

"We'll have to teach them the Bronx cheer," I said.

The pitcher had found her range, and the next two humans managed what looked like genuine little-league at-bats: not great pitching, and some over-enthusiastic swings to be sure, but both made it onto base. The Taus were not good fielders. Their six-legged body design didn't allow for much backward or sideways motion. They had to turn their whole body around to chase balls that flew long.

Still, Yoshi was one happy xenozoologist. He'd captured more unique movements in four innings than in two years of field work.

With the bases loaded, I was up again.

As I approached the plate, I glanced at Dr. Chirac, remembering what she'd said. Play ball. Win.

The first pitch came in high, and I pulled back.

"Ball one!"

The second looked good, and I took a shot at it. But I hadn't expected a good pitch, and my swing was late.

"Strike one!"

The third pitch was low, and I let it go. The fourth was inside, and I left that, too. I snuck a look at Chirac, who nodded subtly.

The next pitch was way outside.

"Ball four—take your base."

I jogged to first, and Hunter walked in to score. The Tau audience squealed with appreciation. A few of my teammates remembered to high-five Hunter, but they looked embarrassed. We'd scored on a walk, against a pitcher who'd never held a baseball before today.

The rest of the game went scoreless. Hunter got another hit, a couple of us managed to get a few grounders and were thrown out at first. As my arm started to go, a couple of Taus got walks as well. But when nine innings were over, the first interplanetary baseball game had been won by humanity, one to zero.

The last Tau batter trotted over to his teammates, and they all touched his head softly with their big hands. A cheer rose up from them, echoing the squeals of the Taus out beyond the fence, and the visiting team made its way across the field and out of sight.

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"Shouldn't we have let them win?" McGill asked. McGill looked like what he was: an aging rig worker, his skin leathery from summers off the Louisiana and California coasts, black half-moons of crude apparently tattooed under his fingernails. He was also the Halihunt rep here on Tau and head of the construction team. Halihunt were our corporate sponsors, who put up some of the funding and all of the political bribes necessary to make the mission happen and would reap the lion's share of benefits. His eyes had the bright sheen they'd shown a year before when we'd had our one fatality, Peter Hernandez lost to a drilling cave-in. Bad PR scared the hell out of McGill.

Dr. Chirac shrugged. "We don't even know if they understand that they lost the game. They knew it was over, because we'd played nine innings and the score was uneven. But do they know actually what winning means?"

We all looked at each other, clueless.

While the rest of the colony celebrated a new bat, the end of a day off, and a new era in human interplanetary contact, the xeno staff and the military had taken our homebrews into command tent. We had to get our story straight before our various reports went back to Earth via the tube.

"I just feel bad about the way we won," Alex said.

I took a deep breath. "I know, Alex, taking that walk seemed like a lame way to score, but the game's the game."

Dr. Chirac jumped in. "I think the colonel is correct. We want to test their understanding as many ways as possible. How much of what they are doing is sheer imitation? How much pattern recognition? And how much is creative thinking—real strategy? Are they actually trying to win?"

"They've seen us react when we win and lose," Jenny said. "They must know we like winning better."

"They have no way of understanding human body language, Sergeant," Dr. Chirac said. "Our cheers may sound like moans of pain to them. And perhaps they have no concept of conquest, which is what winning a game is. The desirability of winning might be a difficult concept for them to come to."

"I'm no linguist," Ashley Newkirk said, puffing at his empty pipe. "But lots of animals play-fight and engage in submission rituals."

Dr. Chirac nodded her head slowly. "But only one animal organizes play-fighting into complex contests of skill. The conflict in sport, the victory and vanquishment, is carefully hidden under dozens of rules and accommodations. We cannot assume the Tau understand this is a fight. It doesn't look like one on the surface. We must discover if they know what it is to win. How far they'll go to avoid losing. If they'd ever cheat."

"Cheating?" Ashley Newkirk protested. "I think we should assume they're trying to play fair."

"A noble assumption, and a proper one so far," Dr. Chirac said. "I merely point out that we should let them push the parameters of the game as far as they can. We have been handed the tool we need to make real contact."

Chirac's words were measured and intense, the look in her eyes one of a lifelong dream coming true before her. When the xeno contact team had been equipped ten years ago, we'd only the vaguest idea there was intelligent life on Tau. Evidence of cultivation had been glimpsed from space, but the locals had stayed clear of the ground probes. On landing, we discovered the Tau's reticence. To make things still harder, their speech and hearing stretched into much higher frequencies than human, higher even than we could analyze with the dolphin gear we'd brought in through the tube. Without specialized devices, of the sort that only a large xeno team and bigger industrial base could supply, we didn't have the technical capacity to learn their language. Except for a few spy cams, we could hardly even study their physical culture.

But now they were playing baseball with us.

Chirac continued. "This game is clearly our best hope for communication. In baseball, everything happens within a relatively simple framework, visible to the naked human eye. A framework which we understand, and hopefully they have come to learn. We shouldn't be caught up with notions of chivalry, Mr. Newkirk. We should try to win these games—that's the best way to test their understanding of rules and strategy."

"Personally," I said, "I doubt they can tell rules from habits. Like when they imitated my warm-up ritual. Do they think you *have* to spit before you pitch?"

"Ach, from watching you lot, I had assumed it was a rule myself," Iain Claymore said.

"And sliding into home plate," Alex said. "Do they know you do it to avoid being tagged or do they think it's just a decorative flourish?"

"That's what we'll be finding out over the next few weeks," Dr. Chirac said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Jenny Flagg said. "Our big problem right now is their physical limitation. I mean, *can* the Taus slide? At the moment, they can't even get a hit. Maybe they never be able to. It'll be hard to explore their strategic thinking if their skills aren't up to it.

We all looked at Yoshi. An evolutionary biologist who doubled as one of our MDs, he had the best understanding of Tau physical abilities.

"Look, they've got plenty of physical skills. They're deadly with those slings. Literally. And they have a number of sling-related behaviors that look game-like. Adolescents throw rocks to each other; adults stage mock sling attacks. Some of those behaviors might, in fact, be rule-governed sports rather than unstructured play."

"Wait a second," I interrupted. "We're the ones with the spy cams and the PhDs. How come they learned how to play baseball before we figured out how any of their games work?"

He shrugged. "Because there's more of them than us. We've only got three people working full-time on dominant species behavior. Dozens of Taus have been watching baseball for over a year. But I'll be prioritizing gameplay from now on, I assure you."

"But can they hit a ball?" Jenny asked.

Yoshi nodded. "There's no mechanical reason they can't. They use spears to fend off projectiles in pre-hunt play. They have superhuman vision and great hand-to-eye. They may not run very fast, but neither did Babe Ruth."

Ashley Newkirk looked quizzical at the name, but no one bothered to explain.

"I think their pitching will come along first. Like I said, it's already in the culture. Probably the only reason they've thrown poorly so far is that we've been playing adults, who generally use slings. As far as fielding goes, they're not used to the dynamics of a perfect sphere, but they should pick that up easy enough. Tau adolescent play includes catching rocks on the fly, but not on the bounce."

"So they'll have more trouble with grounders."

"Probably. But once the ball's in hand, the throw to first base should be fast and accurate. As for batting ..." He shrugged. "It's anyone's guess. But it's a difficult skill even for humans to learn. They're pretty good with spears. Let's give them a chance to develop before we start intentionally walking them."

"Intentional walking?" Ashley said. "What does that mean?"

"When you throw wide on purpose, letting someone get on base without a hit," Alex explained. "For tactical reasons."

Ashley raised his eyebrows and muttered, "Bloody odd game."

I cleared my throat. "Okay, for the moment we play regular ball, the same as we would against a bunch of kids. Take it easy, but play real baseball. Show them the ropes. At least, that's what we'll suggest to NASA."

"You think you'll get permission?" Iain Claymore asked. "Playing games with wee bea may take valuable time away from stealing their oil. We've got a whole planet to exploit he

McGill spoke up, ignoring the Scotsman's tone. "Contact is our second mission priority. In my report, I'll point out that we're ahead of schedule on the pipeline. I'm sure Halihunt won't have any objections to pursuing scientific aims here."

I nodded. "And we won't have any trouble finding volunteers to play, even if they have to use free time. But at some point we may not be so far ahead of schedule, and we'll need your support to keep playing. When xeno writes its report, you've got to sell this project. Make it big: baseball as Rosetta stone."

Dr. Chirac offered us a rare chuckle. "I may steal that line."

"Please do. Any questions?"

"Just one," Ashley said, a smile visible behind his pipe. "What if today they decided they don't like baseball and never show up again?"

Yoshi laughed aloud. "Don't worry about that, Newkirk. Everyone likes baseball."

.....

NASA and Halihunt, of course, decided to play ball.

Our request couldn't have come at a better time. The current powers in Washington were not those who had originally funded the mission, and the space agency, as always, was looking for ways to improve its image. Within the U.S., the idea of exporting the national pastime to Tau was a natural. The Halihunt public relations wing immediately annexed half our discretionary data bandwidth, demanding video of aliens at play. The mission had been a Halihunt loss leader for a decade now, tough to swallow for corporate execs used to thinking about the next quarter, not eight-year space journeys. But here was good PR with its own revenue stream. They wanted to license images and find sponsors for equipment teleports. There were even plans to send us uniforms through the tube. With snazzy corporate logos, of course.

On the international front, a breakthrough in the mission's scientific side was a godsend. Outside the reach of the U.S. media, the Tau expedition was pretty much seen for what it was: an attempt to restore the U.S. to unquestioned superpower status. Seventy years of unilateral

on global warming, oil dependence, and off-and-on military occupation of the Middle East pissed off pretty much the whole world. Despite the fact that every other economic bloc had converted to renewable, Earth's fossil fuel supply was finally drying up. America's decision to open up whole new worlds to drilling was going down like day-old fried eggs.

After two years of hard work, I'd started to get nervous, wondering if the economics of our primary mission would prove viable. Our oil wells were useless unless the hundred-square-kilometer solar array could keep transport cheap: The energy costs went down geometrically when power was available at both ends of the tube. And the longer you kept a single tube open, the cheaper and more stable it became. Thus, the London-New York-Beijing tube was very efficient, and long-haul aircraft a thing of the past, but you still had to drive to the local store. The math said that a perpetual tube carrying a thousand barrels a minute of crude from Tau to Earth was profitable in the extreme and would give the U.S. economy another hundred years to switch over. But the technology had never been tested in industrial quantities on an interplanetary scale.

If Tau's frequent Coriolis rains interrupted input to the solar array, if the planet's petroleum reserves varied unusably in composition, if the transport math didn't hold up over interstellar distances ... I had lived daily with the possibility that all our work here might be pointless.

Until now.

As of that first game, we had done something no other human beings had ever done. After two years of being snubbed by the locals, as if they knew what we were up to and didn't approve, we had finally made contact with them. They had walked into our camp, held our tools in their big hands, tried to communicate on our terms.

They even wanted to play with us.

That night after the first game, having drunk six beers and sent off my report, I went to bed happy, feeling as if my little colony finally belonged here on Tau.

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Yoshi was right; they mastered the pitching first.

Their fast balls were wicked, slapping hard into the catcher's soft, bare hands. They introduced their first game adaptation as a result, rotating catchers every inning, just behind the line-up, so that the next few batters up would have unbruised hands. And they developed a selection of deadly curve balls.

They seemed to understand the battle of the count very well. You never knew whether they were going to throw a hittable fast ball or a slicing curve. Of course, as Dr. Chirac pointed out, a random number generator could provide the same challenge. But when you swung through

empty air, it sure felt like there was guile behind those mean, fast pitches.

Hunter and Alex loved batting against real pitching for a change, but for old guys like me it became seriously difficult to get a hit. I took to bunting, putting the ball onto the ground to take advantage of their shaky fielding. This engendered their second big adaptation, moving the infield in whenever slow swingers were at the plate. For three straight games, I couldn't buy a base.

Then one day, standing ready to get out again, I noticed something that I'd missed. Before the pitch, the catcher pointed two of his fat, short fingers at the ground. I reacted instinctively, swinging hard as the pitcher let go. One of our brand new Sluggers (Louisville Sportscraft, one of our official sponsors now) connected with the ball, electrifying my hands with the blissful shiver of the sweet spot. The ball soared over the insultingly contracted outfield, and I rounded second before the sheetgrass brought the ball to a stop, three Tau fielders in shambolic pursuit.

I pulled up at third, out of breath and not wanting to risk the awesome Tau throw-in. A coach came out to coach.

"Nice hit, Colonel. Looks like you're out of your slump."

"There's been a new development." She waited patiently as my breath came back. "I read their signs."

"You what? They're flashing signs?" She looked at the third baseman a few meters from us. Her slightly spicy scent drifted over to us in the light breeze.

I nodded. "*Our* signs, that Hunter and I always used."

"You guys had signs?"

"Yeah. Hunter's idea. No one ever figured it out. Except the Tau, apparently."

"You think they saw you flash all the way from the fence?"

"Too far. They must have picked them up since they started playing us. Still learning."

"And they're consistent?"

"Let's find out."

Honorio, our Cuban military attaché, stepped up to the plate. I squinted at the catcher. As quick as Hunter's agile fingers, she flashed three to the side.

"Change-up."

The pitcher started her usual fastball wind up, but the ball came out of the whirlwind moving a hair slow. Honorio swung early, missing everything.

"Good eye," Alex said quietly.

I called the next two pitches. Honorio did not, and found himself headed to the bench.

"Superb, Colonel," Alex said. "They've adopted our symbolic behavior. Learned our language."

"Chirac's going to eat this up. But I wonder if the Tau know they're supposed to be secret."

"That'll be easy enough to find out, Colonel. Just make it clear we recognize your old s and we're getting hits because of it. Maybe then they'll make up their own."

"Good idea, but let's talk to Chirac first. And not a word about this to anyone until after game."

"Sir?"

"Right now I'm going to get me some hits."

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"Wittgenstein speaks of a 'language game' in which two workers are building a wall. Worker A says 'block,' 'pillar,' 'slab,' or 'beam.' Worker B hands him the appropriate piece of rock or wood, and the wall gets built."

"So, Doctor," Jenny Flagg spoke up, "exactly where was, uh ... Wittgenstein going with this?"

Dr. Chirac smiled. "His point was that the worker delivering the components doesn't need to know how the slabs and beams are used. Worker B doesn't even need to know that it's a wall they're building. All he has to do is respond to each word with the appropriate action. In the language game, as in most cases when we use natural language, what matters is not understanding, but the appropriate response."

"Sort of like our pitching signs," Alex said. "The pitcher doesn't have to know why the catcher wants a slider or a fastball, as long as the catcher's done her homework."

"And as long as the signs are interpreted correctly, and the right pitch delivered, yes. The pitcher, like Worker B, doesn't actually have to understand the task beyond appropriate responses."

"The pitcher's like a robot," Hunter said, winking at me.

I ignored him, saying, "But in this case, the catcher, Worker A, is also a Tau. She must have some kind of a clue what she wants the pitcher to throw, which means she's got to have

some objective in mind."

Dr. Chirac opened her hands to the heavens. "Or possibly Worker A is herself following a learned response. A certain sequence of pitches for a certain batter. Or perhaps they're simply repeating all our pitches since they began their observation, in the same order."

"How come we never just assume they're playing baseball?" Jenny Flagg asked.

"Oh, I assure you, Sergeant," Dr. Chirac said, "they *are* playing baseball. Wittgenstein's point is that Worker B is still building a wall, whether or not he understands the exact purpose of each piece in it. When we teach children how to use language, we start with just such an absence of background knowledge."

Jenny spoke for all of us. "Huh?"

"Ask a young girl how old she is. She'll say 'three' and hold up three fingers. But this three-year-old cannot accurately define for you what a year is or even know that each finger represents one year in some abstract sense. She has simply been taught to make a certain gesture and sound in response to a certain question."

She turned to Hunter. "But children are not robots, of course. They are simply people with incomplete language development. These simple language games are how they learn the language, like a puzzle falling into place from meaningless pieces."

"So you're saying it doesn't matter whether they're just imitating us or whether they actually understand the game," I said.

"It *does* matter. With good reason, teachers and parents want to know when the child actually comprehends what a year is. That understanding is the goal of the developmental language game. But in the meantime, what we are doing is not useless. We are teaching them the imitative responses around which real comprehension is built."

I decided to bring it back to my original question. "So we shouldn't let them win?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. The appropriate response in any game is to try to win. We should be upset when we walk a Tau player, not walk several in a row to give up runs. And we should clap and cheer when we win. That's what winning means: It's the thing you want to happen. We must continue to demonstrate that and strive to keep our reactions consistent."

Jenny Flagg shook her head. "But humans don't always try to win every game. Sometimes you let kids win. And you always pitch a little bit easier to them."

"Perhaps my analogy is straining. These are not children. We must assume that these Tau are researchers, scientists even. They may not have PhDs as we understand them, but they have been selected to make contact and learn what they can about us. Right now, that means playing baseball properly."

McGill, who'd read the last transmission from Halihunt and NASA, looked at me.

"Well, I got to say, Houston isn't going to be happy with that," I said. "The PR angle was great, until they realized that the Taus still haven't got so much as a single, and that we clobber them every game. Kind of takes the shine off it."

"We're ambassadors here," McGill chimed in. "We've come in the spirit of friendship. Would it kill us to let them win a couple?"

"Frankly, I think the problem is in your attitude. You're being very American, I must say. We all looked at Ashley Newkirk, who continued. "This isn't about winning, but playing the game properly, which means doing your best. You Americans seem transfixed by the idea that a game that can't be won isn't worth playing. One example: I was in the States once for your so-called 'World Series,' to which no other countries are invited, I might add."

"Except Canada," Jenny said.

"And Havana is in the league now, excuse me," Honorio added.

"Very well, but what happened was this: I understood this 'World Series' was to be several games long. But when one of the sides won the first four, they simply stopped playing!"

No one else said a word, so I offered, "And ...?"

Ashley shook his head. "So typical. Can't win, go home. In cricket, a five-test series always is played to the end, even when one of the sides can no longer possibly win."

"But why?" Jenny cried.

"Because a test series has five matches," Ashley said, not too helpfully. "Why get so caught up with winning? As long as the Tau are willing to play, why not play?"

"Well, we are American, and this is baseball," I said. "And it *is* a problem."

What I didn't explain was the other part of NASA's concern: how the imbalance in our interplanetary league was playing to the rest of the world. A fundamentally American team beating a bunch of untrained beginners at our own national game, relentlessly, day in and day out. The perfect sports metaphor for the way we'd been dealing with the rest of the world for the last century.

"It's not quite the morale builder it used to be, either," Jenny added. "With their pitching good, at least it's fun to try to get hits off them. But three-up, three-down from them nine innings every game is getting tedious. It's not good sport."

Alex gestured to Yoshi. "Any chance of that changing?"

He looked dubious. "Here's the problem."

The wallscreen lit, showing a Tau at bat with skeleton superimposed. It moved slowly

through a swing, and red highlights appeared at its upper elbow joints.

"When humans swing a bat, most of the rotation doesn't come from our shoulders; it comes from the elbow and wrist. Taus don't have much mobility there; their two elbows bend less than our one, and they have relatively little wrist action. That's why they throw straight-arm

"So they'll never get much force?"

"Not enough for a solid hit. And if we pitch slower, like Jenny suggested, it'll just make it worse. They need to connect with a fastball to get any power. As far as I can see, they'll only ever be really good at bunting. For them to score consistently, we'd have to fake some seriously bad fielding."

Alex sighed. "And they're so damn observant, they'd know what we were up to."

"Or worse, interpret it as part of the game," Dr. Chirac said.

"Well, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't," I said. "Any ideas?"

"What about mixed teams?" Jenny said. "Some Tau and some humans on each side."

We looked at Chirac.

"A fascinating idea, but how would we ask?"

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A week later, everything changed.

I was warming up for another desultory first inning of striking out three hapless Tau when a new batter came up to the plate.

We knew the usual Tau team by now. They rotated among about a dozen regulars, distinguishable by thorax markings, the gray and yellow speckled across what I thought of as their chests. This Tau had a distinct cluster of reddish dots near her right shoulder that I'd never seen before. She also had a strange stance, the bat held out low, almost over the plate, as if she wasn't quite ready yet.

I decided to go easy on her, waving off Hunter's signal for a fastball. (We had changed our signs, given that the Tau were reading them, but our opponents, disappointingly, had yet to do theirs.) Hunter glanced at the new player, nodded understanding, and signalled a slow ball, the new pitch we'd invented without telling Dr. Chirac. She'd probably noticed the easy throw we were sneaking in, but hadn't complained. The Tau had managed to get a piece of one or two but never out of the infield. Yoshi was right: If you threw slow, their puny swings couldn't

generate any power. If you threw fast, they missed completely.

I did my usual wind-up ritual, spitting with a little extra distance to make the newcomers feel at home, and threw.

The Tau did not swing.

"Strike one!" Chirac called.

I shrugged to Hunter and sent in another meat pitch.

Again, it ignored the ball.

"Strike two!"

"Mighty Casey at the bat," I muttered.

On my third slow pitch, the Tau feebly lifted her bat to meet the ball. It connected, and tipped over Hunter's head. He ran after it, gathered it up, and threw it back to me.

My fourth pitch got the same treatment.

As did my fifth.

Hunter, running back with an annoyed look on his face, signalled for a fastball.

I nodded and wound up, then let a hard one fly.

The Tau's knees bent, the bat rising to again meet the ball. This time the hit angled away from home plate at ninety degrees, rolling toward Yoshi within his forest of new tubed-in cameras.

Yoshi threw it back to me with a puzzled expression.

I shook off Hunter until he gave me a slider, then threw the meanest pitch I could, which broke to the outside just before it reached the Tau.

She didn't swing.

"Ball one!" Chirac cried.

I stretched to loosen up my shoulder, which had twinged a bit on delivery. The Tau did not swing at bad pitches much anymore. Their incredible eyesight and observational skills were pretty hard to beat. But this was a new player. She was awfully cool for a creature who'd never held a baseball bat before.

Were they reading our signs again?

When Hunter signalled for a fastball, I nodded.

And threw a change-up.

Hunter may have been fooled, but the batter reached out with impeccable timing and tapped the ball backward at about forty-five degrees. One of the xeno team assisting Yoshi already there, and threw it back to Hunter.

I swallowed. The Taus, or one of them anyway, had come up with a strategy.

Hunter must have realized I wasn't sure about our signs, and his fingers flashed gobbledygook.

I nodded, and threw a curve ball. The Tau left it alone again, and it zoomed past an unprepared Hunter.

"Ball two!"

I tried three more fast balls in succession. The Tau tapped the first two away effortlessly but by the third my arm was wearing, and she remained motionless as the ball carried low outside.

"Ball three!"

I threw one into the dirt, aiming for the Tau's bat.

It stepped back, and the ball bounced off Hunter's glove, rolling back toward me across the sheetgrass.

"Ball four. Take your base!" Dr. Chirac cried.

I tugged on my cap and looked around at the fielders. They stared back at me a bit befuddled. We had walked Tau batters before, but none had ever *deserved* it like this batter. She'd worked the ball like a pro, and frustrated me into giving her the base.

I stretched my arm, hoping there weren't going to be any more at-bats like that one.

There were.

The next batter, a regular player with broad gray stripes that faded in the middle of her thorax, also sat out the first two pitches. But once she had two strikes on her, she consistently tipped the ball over Hunter's head, defending the strike zone with effortless precision. I did not throw her any intentional balls, but she finally walked when my arm faltered after twelve pitches.

"Take your base!"

For the first time ever, a Tau was in scoring position.

I tried deception next. Hunter and I rotated through my selection of curve balls, knuckleballs, and sliders. I did my best to stay on the periphery of the strike zone, trying to throw Dr. Chirac some tricky calls.

This Tau also proved too smooth for me, though. She took a stab at anything even approaching a strike, only leaving the obvious wild pitches alone. Since she didn't need a s hit, she could swing and connect with everything that wasn't garbage. The balls eventually came.

The bases were loaded.

With the next Tau I went inside, hoping the thin end of the bat might pop one up for Hunter to catch. But that extra elbow came in handy; she pulled back easily and used the top of the sweet spot, sending every ball fast and high over Hunter's head. He was getting exhausted from chasing balls.

The first Tau, that new one, walked into home. The Tau had scored their first run.

The usual cheer came from the alien audience, with what sounded to my untrained ear a little something extra. A few of the humans managed to find their voices as well.

I called Hunter to the mound, and Alex jogged over from third base.

"You need relief, Colonel?"

I rubbed my arm, which was screaming. "Not yet. Let's try one more thing. Hunter, how about you stand up?"

"What?"

"It'll put you in better position to catch the high tips."

"Yeah, with my face." Although we had a catcher's mask, Hunter didn't have a proper protector. I made a mental note to request one.

"I'll send some slow ones in. See if we can't get a foul out."

"Okay?" He sounded dubious.

"What are you smiling about?"

Alex shrugged. "This is great. They've found a way to score. Talk about strategic thinking. A whole new way to play baseball."

"Yeah. I guess. If you can call it baseball."

The rest of the inning went much the same way. I got one actual out, managing to squeeze a pop fly from the bottom of their order, the pitcher. After that, they scored five more runs to make it an even ten, walking all the way. Then the next two stood impassively and let me send them out, which took some doing at that point, my arm on fire from shoulder to fingertips.

Across the rest of the game, we put up a mighty struggle, posting eleven runs of our own more than we had in ages. We subbed through five different pitchers (I was done after that

inning), but no one managed to get more than one out per inning. It was always the Tau who decided when their ups were over. They scored exactly ten runs per inning, and when the game was done they had walked into home an even ninety times.

For the first time in history, humanity had lost a baseball game.

By seventy-nine runs.

.....

The usual xeno team was there, all on time for once, along with the military and McGill. I sat down and turned to Yoshi.

"So what the hell happened?"

"They got a new strategy, I guess."

"No kidding. But how did it happen so fast? From zero runs to ninety in one game."

He nodded. "It surprised me, too. But now that I've thought about it, the real question is why. Why didn't they do it all along?"

He queued a field recording, a Tau frozen in the pixelated grayscale of a fly-sized spy camera. The creature held a spear out before itself like a sword.

Yoshi eye-moused, and the screen jumped into motion. The Tau wove and dodged, hitting at flying objects with the spear.

"This is one of their pre-hunting rituals, or games, or punishments. I've been focusing on that since our first game with the Tau. The other adults in the hunt are slinging rocks at her, and she's fending them off with her spear."

"Looks dangerous," Jenny said.

"Not for a Tau. Their hand-to-eye is too good, and with those double elbows they can cover their whole body efficiently. The Tau may not swing with any power, but they're good at blocking an object that's coming toward them."

I frowned. "So they've always been capable of the batting they showed today?"

"Sure. Those slings can get a projectile up to two hundred K. And they don't hold back. Any adult Tau could fend off balls thrown by humans. Add a little understanding of the strike zone, and they can get a walk pretty much at will."

"Two hundred kilometers per hour?" I repeated.

He nodded. "Yep. Much faster than any pitch you're going to manage, Colonel."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

"So why did they wait until now to kick our asses?" Alex asked.

Yoshi shrugged. "Cause they didn't think of it?"

Dr. Chirac spoke up. "It wasn't part of the grammar of baseball as they understood it. Human players generally try to get a hit. Look at your terminology: You think of the tipped as 'foul,' or bad. You count the first two as strikes. But for a player with the Taus' skill set, foul ball ultimately puts the batter in control." She nodded to herself. "It seems probable that until now they were imitating us, trying to play the way we do. They were probably more interested in experiencing the game's normal rituals than in beating us."

"But that new player," I said, "the one who led off today, had a different idea."

"She wanted to win," Alex said.

Dr. Chirac lowered her voice. "This is the conceptual breakthrough we have been hoping for."

"And the PR save we needed," McGill said happily. "The Tau finally got a game off us and they did it by figuring out a totally new way to play baseball."

"Not exactly, Mr. McGill."

We all looked at Alex.

"The way they were playing reminded me of something I read about when I was a kid. While you guys on the field were getting mopped up by aliens, I burned most of my data allowance doing some historical research."

A headsup limned her face, dense fields of scrolling stats. "It turns out this is not a new way to play baseball. In 1887, there was a St. Louis Browns player named James Edward O'Neill. He was known generally as 'Tip' O'Neill, because of his expertise at foul tips. He could keep any ball in play, never striking out, wearing down pitchers until he could get on base. Back then, walks were part of your batting average, so he didn't care if he walked or his way on. His average was .485 that year."

"Almost *five hundred*?" Yoshi shook his head. "That's pretty damn good."

"Yeah, but our six-legged friends are about twice that good."

"They should be," Yoshi said. "They're designed for it."

"So someone must have found a way to stop this O'Neill guy," I said. "I mean, I've never heard of him."

"They didn't stop him," Alex said. "They changed the rules. Since that year, walks don't count in your average. So these days, collecting four balls earns you about as much glory as getting hit by a pitch."

"Yeah," Yoshi said, "except that the Tau don't know about batting averages. We don't know if they can conceive of averages."

"Hell," I muttered. "We don't even know if they can *count*. I mean, they beat us like a rented mule. Seventy-nine runs!"

"They clearly can count," Chirac said. "They were quite exact in scoring ten runs each inning."

"Do you think that's significant?" Alex asked. "Is it some kind of SETI thing, like they're trying to establish a base-ten rubric for future communication?"

"Perhaps they were declaring," Ashley Newkirk said. "In the mother game, a far better side doesn't keep relentlessly thrashing an opponent once they've beat them. Wouldn't be cricket."

"But ninety runs?" I said. "That's one hell of a safety margin."

Yoshi grunted. "It's nothing to the score they could have racked up. They let us off the hook after ten runs an inning. Our pitching only ever got their pitcher out, and then only about every other at-bat."

"Thank god they don't know about designated hitters," Jenny muttered.

Alex still had her headsup on, and her fingers moved. "So we manage only one out every eighteen ups, which is three outs every fifty-four. That's fifty-one runs an inning. Which is . . . four hundred fifty-nine runs a game."

"Good god," Ashley said, "that sounds rather like a—" He stopped without saying another word.

"Like a royal ass-kicking," Jenny Flagg said.

.....

There's only one thing worse than always winning, and that's always losing.

The games went incredibly long now. The Tau innings were torturous. Each lasted six at-bats, most of which went ten pitches or more. The Tau went through relief pitchers like potato chips on Super Bowl Sunday, leaving half the human inhabitants of the planet walking

around with their arms in a sling. Late in the game, we had to intentionally walk to save our arms for the gimme outs. Otherwise, there'd be no one left who could throw a strike at all.

Playing the Tau was so depressing that it became hard to motivate nine players onto the field. Chirac and the rest of the xenos were merciless, however. They weren't about to give their close contact just because a bunch of whining soldiers and construction workers didn't want to get their butts kicked every day. And Chirac refused to give us a bigger strike zone. Just as she had when the Taus were losing, she insisted on sticking with Alexander Cartwright's rules.

Halihunt and NASA didn't like the way things were going any more than we did. The U.S. media took less than a week to go into crisis mode, with long essays about how the country's ascendancy was clearly over. Beaten at our own game by the first aliens we'd run into. My team's inability to get an out became the current metaphor for America's outdated infrastructure, our dependence on old paradigms and fossil fuels, our preference for force over finesse. Halihunt's sponsorship schemes crumbled like a cheap taco in a Texas tornado, and their stock price took a beating. How was our little colony supposed to save the American economy if we couldn't throw a strike?

Needless to say, the rest of the world just ate it up with a spoon. Finally, the little guys were kicking our ass. But we were forbidden from giving up the game. The last thing Houston or Washington for that matter, could abide was for us to look like bad losers.

We were still damned if we did and damned if we didn't.

And boy, was my right arm sore.

.....

Other than our troubles on the field, everything was going swell. Work on the array was still on schedule. The solar collection elements were finally propagating in the mica-rich soil, turning a huge mountainside into a shimmering mirror. It was beautiful at sunrise, and generated enough power to contribute significantly to the tube. Our transport rations tripled, then tripled again, and we even got to the point where we could reverse the usual flow, sending a few specks of Tau dust back to Houston for analysis. As our power increased and the math held up, morale recovered quickly from our perpetual losing streak. Once the tube got wider and more stable, humans could pass through safely. The nagging question of when and if we were all getting back to Earth had been answered.

We had a long dry spell, the Coriolis rains not interrupting our power supply for long enough to fully charge our batteries, and managed to keep the tube open for fifteen straight days. Finally we had the stability to make every teleport a smooth one, and that's when some

genius in Houston got the idea ...

.....

It was Alex and Yoshi and me again. This time in secret.

We kept the transport shed unlit, using the night vision on our headsups. It was local midnight, when the fewest humans would be awake to notice our little brownout. If something went wrong—a one-in-forty chance at our current power levels—we didn't want anyone to know what had happened, here on Tau or back in the rest of humanity. I would have kept Yoshi out of it, but he was the only MD who I could imagine being sympathetic to our little plan.

Alex stepped up to the tube controls, checking the connection strength, and nodded to me. I could see her fingers crossed in the grainy green of my headsup.

"Night vision off, unless you want to go blind," I said. My accomplices, the tube, and I disappeared into blackness.

"Three, two ..." Alex said softly.

The tube glowed, and suddenly everything was as white as a fresh snowfall at noon. I heard a shout of surprise somewhere else in the camp as we leeched every drop of juice. On Earth, whole cities must have flickered.

The light sputtered, then dropped off into blackness again.

I switched my headsup back on and blinked until the green shapes became recognizable.

"Alex, you don't have to look."

"Not a problem, sir."

"Do I?" Yoshi asked.

"That's why you're here."

I saw Yoshi's headsup flicker to life as he stepped forward toward the transport. I popped the clean-seals and was surprised by the absence of a vacuum hiss. Of course, they'd spent extra power to send air along this time.

No point in waiting. I pulled the lid up hard.

"*Madre!*"

That was a good sign.

"*Madre de dios!*"

"Mr. Rodriguez?" Yoshi asked. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone put mescal in my cornflakes, man. Do you guys do this all the time?"

Alex and I looked at each other. This was our first hint that Sammy "La Bamba" Rodriguez had not been fully briefed on the situation.

But at least he was alive.

The Tau human team had a new ringer.

.....

After two years and four months (Earth time) in a community of twenty-nine people isolated from the rest of the species by light-years, walking into a mess tent with a brand new human being creates something of a stir. Some don't notice him, almost don't *see* the newcomer, as the stranger recognition centers of their brains have atrophied. Some react as they would to an invader when encountering the first unfamiliar face in years. A few immediately want to scold the guy. Most simply think they've lost their minds.

Only Jenny Flagg immediately saw what was up.

"New talent?"

I nodded. "Get a team together, a good one. The best eight we can field, for a game at the usual time."

"But not the usual game, I see, sir."

I nodded. "And pull Hunter off whatever he's doing right now. We'll need an hour of warm-up to acclimate La Bamba's arm to point-nine-five gees."

"You got it, sir." She stood, scanning the mess tent for the best players, a happy smile on her face. Jenny had never stopped trying to win.

"She's cute," Rodriguez said.

I blinked. It had been a couple of years since I'd heard a typical male response to a new female face. "Let's talk about baseball, Mr. Rodriguez."

"I am here to play."

"You know our problem."

"I've seen video. You have trouble getting a strike-out. They keep tipping until you walk them."

"Right. They'll give you the first two strikes, but after that it's impossible."

"Not for La Bamba."

"We'll see. Just make sure you throw soft for the first two balls. Nice, easy strikes. Mi as well not give them any warning."

"Don't worry, Colonel. I will win your game for you. For America. For humanity."

Sammy Rodriguez was a man in purgatory. Early in his brilliant career, it was thought he would be one of the great pitchers in the history of the game. He'd been a rare unanimous selection for the Cy Young Award. Over his first three playoff series, he'd managed an ERA of less than one, and was one of the few modern pitchers who regularly went nine innings. He'd come within a walk of a perfect game three times. The guy could even swing a bat. He had an average of .274, the best of any pitcher in the National League. On a planet of amateurs, he would have been Babe Ruth squared.

He also had an addiction. The man liked to gamble. If only he'd kept it to the horses, the slots, the Super Bowl—hell, *anything* but baseball—he'd be in Tampa right now instead of seven light-years from the nearest beach. But for the moment, he was banned for life from the game he loved, an exile odious enough that he had risked a quite possibly fatal ride down a quantum tube to get one more crack at immortality. And, of course, redemption of a very lucrative kind.

NASA and Halihunt loved this narrative. Immigrant laborer embraced and enriched by a new country, falls from grace due to tragic character flaw, and rebuilds his life on the new frontier. The story was all set up and ready to go. They had been working the U.S. media around to the angle that *we* were the underdogs now, playing to win against a superhuman force whose idea of baseball was pernicious and un-American and, frankly, not baseball at all. Even La Bamba had come here to save us—in secret even, wanting no credit (and in case he'd turned to mush in the tube)—and to save baseball itself.

.....

If the Taus realized we had a newcomer, they didn't show it.

Sammy bounded out to the mound with that walk we'd all had two years before, not quite toned down for the low gravity yet. NASA had been training him with a specially designed

taxpayer-funded, ninety-five-percent-weight ball for a couple of weeks, so after a few perfect deliveries to Hunter, I'd decided to save his arm for the game. The two of them had spent the rest of the morning on a new set of signs. I wanted every advantage in this first encounter. It was possible the Tau would adapt to his pitching after a few games and prove once and for all that they could beat any team of humans, professional or amateur, at any time. But at least we'd have this one win after our string of fifty-three losses.

I was pleased when the first Tau stepped up to the plate, the one with reddish dots who had started our losing streak in the first place. She would be the one to suffer maximum shock and awe. La Bamba opened up his big guns.

"Play ball," Chirac yelled, and even the humans in the never-reached outfield looked nervous to go.

Rodriguez followed my advice and sent the first two in soft and easy. The Tau let them go, giving up the strikes.

La Bamba, it must be said, had a sense of drama. He allowed himself a long warm-up on the third pitch, checking the bases as if they were loaded, squinting at Hunter's sign although we'd already agreed on a screwball for this pitch.

When he let fly, it was spectacular. I'd never watched a major-league pitcher from dugout range before. The ball screamed toward the plate, looking to go inside. The Tau had picked up her hind feet, ready to step back for a ball, when it broke back to the right and down, smack into Hunter's glove in the middle of the strike zone.

"Strike three, you're out!" Chirac cried.

The Tau had struck out looking.

Maybe it was my imagination, but the creature seemed a bit stunned as it headed back toward the alien dugout. Except for when the Taus declared after ten runs, that particular pitch had never gotten out in her career.

"Builds character," I said to myself.

La Bamba worked his magic on the next two aliens in short order. They managed a couple of pokes to send the ball foul, but they weren't ready for his speed and breadth of repertoire. After years as the best pitcher on the planet, I had forgotten how mediocre I really was. Probably, that was for the best. I'd done very little to prepare our alien friends for what a normal human pitcher could do.

For our ups, we led off with Rodriguez, and he managed a credible double off the third pitch. From second, he caught my eye and nodded his head, showing some respect. The Tau were fine pitchers; they simply were no more prepared for a pro batter than they had been for a pro pitcher.

The rest of the human team rose to the occasion, lifting their offensive game so that La Bamba, then Hunter and Alex could score in the first. Rodriguez ploughed through the Tau order for the next two innings without breaking a sweat, and by the time the fourth rolled around, we were up eight to zero.

And the reddish-spotted Tau was back.

After the first two strikes, she shifted her stance, adjusting the bat to bring it higher. He threw her a standard curve next, which she managed to glance past Hunter. She fended off the next two pitches as well.

An epic battle ensued. Rodriguez worked her from every conceivable angle, attacking strike zone with knuckle balls and screws and straight-up speed. But she deftly kept her at-bats alive.

I was so mesmerized by the contest that I almost missed Alex waving at me from third. He was making our sign for intentional walk.

I passed it to Hunter, who signalled La Bamba. The man waved it off at first, but after a few more foul tips he relented, letting the Tau on base. As long as it was just this one, we could afford it, and we had to keep Rodriguez's arm in the game.

We got out of that inning okay, but the Taus were gradually adapting.

They scored their first run in the seventh. Our ringer had intentionally walked a couple Taus who were proving troublesome, and had been whittled down by a third. With two out they were back at the top of the order, and Redspots managed to force in a run before Rodriguez sealed the inning.

By that time, the human team had scored twenty-three, the most runs our dispirited crew had put together in ages. But it was clear the Taus were getting better with every inning, analyzing the new pitches coming their way, and full counts were the norm as they wore down La Bamba's arm with long and exhausting at-bats.

I sighed. If only this had been a seven-inning game. But the geniuses at NASA had demanded a regulation nine.

In the eighth, the Tau really started to score. The effortless look had returned to their batting, and Hunter was panting from chasing the foul tips that soared over his head. La Bamba pitched heroically, pain distorting his face with every throw, but they chipped away at our lead. With the bases loaded he dispatched their pitcher, battled through the order for one more out, then got the pitcher again. Seven runs, for a total of eight.

Rodriguez came back to our dugout, all the low-gravity bounce gone from his step, and he clutched an ice pack to his right arm.

"How're you doing?"

He looked at me sullenly. "We will win, Coach. Don't worry."

Alex trotted over from third. "Colonel, we've got twenty-three runs, so we've got to get seven more."

"How do you figure?"

"If Sammy keeps fighting every batter, he's going to lose his arm for good. But he can't get their pitcher. Hell, even *you* get her every once in a while."

I let that pass. Yesterday I'd been the best pitcher on the planet. How quickly they forg

Alex continued. "If Rodriguez walks the other eight players, that's three times through the full order. Twenty-four batters on base, minus three to load: twenty-one runs. That'll give the twenty-nine total. If we can haul thirty runs, we win. And we've got two more ups. We can do it!"

I nodded, but seven runs in two innings was a tall order.

"Let's see how this one goes."

We almost sealed it in the bottom of the eighth. Alex passed the word that we needed more runs, and we managed to load the bases. La Bamba, gritting his teeth in pain, drove in all three of them, then Alex sent him home. After a couple of strike-outs, we had the bases loaded again.

But Jenny Flagg let us down. The Tau sent her a meat pitch, and she dropped her usual Texas-leaguer into the close outfield. The Tau were already in motion, though, coming in to make the catch.

She staggered to a stop on the way to first, hands over her face.

I shook my head. You had to admit the Tau had learned a lot from us.

"Don't worry, Jenny," I shouted. "We've got one more inning."

I told Rodriguez the plan.

"Eight intentional walks in a row? *Madre!*"

"Don't fight them, Sammy. Save your arm for the pitcher. She's the weak link."

He shook his head, pulled down his filter mask and spat. "That is no way to win." He walked to the mound without another word.

He fought the first batter in the order, but the red-spotted Tau took him apart, whacking the fastball around like a piñata on a short string. Sammy's arm was faltering, weakening with every pitch, and the pain finally convinced him that Alex's plan was the only way. For the next seven batters, Hunter stood off to the side to catch underhanded throws, and we watched the

Taus' score climb to thirteen. Then La Bamba plugged away at the pitcher, taking her down with four exquisite pitches. Eight walks later, they had twenty-one. For a second out, Rodriguez's third pitch caught the pitcher looking with a crafty knuckle ball that dropped like a rock into the strike zone.

He walked eight more, until they had twenty-nine, then motioned Hunter back to the plate.

It was a fierce battle, fifteen pitches of trench warfare with a full count and bases loaded, eight more runs looming if La Bamba let the pitcher on base, but he finally managed to find the third strike. She went swinging.

Bottom of the ninth, and we were two runs behind. And we did *not* want to go into extra innings.

Yoshi batted first. He took a vicious swing at the first pitch and sent a pop fly soaring into the red sky. Three Taus converged beneath it between second and third, squeaking at each other as if telling jokes while they waited to make the catch.

Then came Hunter. He fouled off the first, then let a strike go past, then missed a fast ball that Joe DiMaggio couldn't have connected with.

Two up, two down.

La Bamba was next, and we all relaxed for the moment. He would at least keep us alive. At a National League game, you usually take a piss-break when the pitcher's up, not realizing that most of them are in the top percentile of humanity. Against the still-amateur Taus, he was batting a thousand so far.

Alex went on deck, warming up with two extra bats. I remembered with some nostalgia the days when we'd had only one Slugger, worn electrical tape around its neck to replace the glove and nothing at stake.

The first pitch came in, and Sammy ignored it.

"Strike one!" Chirac proclaimed.

He stepped back on the second pitch, scratching his ear disdainfully.

"Strike two!"

He moved into a bunter's crouch. When the next pitch came in, he glanced it off toward first base, well foul. He foul tipped the next one as well.

Alex jogged over and hissed, "Is he doing what I think he's doing?"

I nodded. "He's getting them back. Playing their own game against them."

"Why doesn't he just *wail* on it?"

He bunted another pitch foul.

"Could be his arm. Could be his ego."

He stepped back from the next pitch, a ball. One-fourth of a walk.

But La Bamba's plans were subtler than we knew. Two pitches later, he hauled off and swung for real, hoping to catch us all by surprise. But the bat cracked like a rifle shot, scattering splinters from home plate to the mound. The ball bounced tepidly to first, where the baseman picked it up and stepped on the bag.

Humanity had lost again.

.....

"Maybe a team entirely of pro pitchers. One for every inning."

"No, all-star swingers to rack up a big score, with lots of relief at the end."

"Better hope they never hear about the designated hitter rule."

We were sitting in the mess tent—defeated players, the military, the xeno team—trying to figure what to do next. Somehow, the discussion had got around to whether *any* team of humans could ever beat the Taus.

La Bamba sat with his head on the table, three ice packs strapped to his pitching arm. He kept saying, "Everything, everything."

Alex rubbed his shoulders. "Cheer up, Sammy. You'll still be a hero for trying."

He turned his head from side to side without lifting it from the table, as if rolling out a pie crust with his face.

"No, I lose everything! House ... car ..."

I shared a look with Alex. "Rodriguez? You didn't *bet* on this game, did you?"

He was silent.

Then I remembered that some London bookie had offered twenty-to-one that humans wouldn't beat the Tau on their own planet anytime this year. Rodriguez must have figured that his secret call-up was the fix of the century.

"Swimming pool," he whimpered.

"You win for humanity, huh?" I said.

Alex shrugged and continued to rub his shoulders.

McGill groaned, his eyes rolling up in his head. "This is a PR disaster! We bring in a team to beat the poor defenseless aliens, and we *still* lose. Then it turns out our ringer was betting on the game."

"Maybe you should just sneak me home. Like you snuck me here," Rodriguez said. "For this game ever happened."

"That would be nice," I said. "But not everyone on this planet is U.S. military. We can only control the story for so long."

Alex stopped her massage. "Wait a second, Sammy. Did you say send you home?"

"Yes. I want to go home now. My arm is broken."

I swallowed. La Bamba had not in fact been fully briefed. "Rodriguez, you *do* know that the tube isn't up to two-way teleport yet, right? We don't have enough power for a push from this end. Nothing bigger than a speck of dust, anyway."

"Speck of dust? What?"

Alex leaned closer, her hands still on his shoulders. "You can't go back for six months at least, Sammy."

"*Madre!*"

.....

Late that night, Ashley Newkirk showed up at my tent.

"Any brilliant solutions to your sporting dilemma yet, Colonel?"

I looked up at him through a haze of Iain Claymore's whisky.

"Not much of a dilemma. Don't see that I have any choice one way or the other. Lose or lose does not constitute a dilemma."

"And you were so close. Poor Mr. Rodriguez doesn't have another game in him?"

"He's on strike. Breach of contract."

"Ah, labor disputes. Always a messy business in sport. But surely there are choices. You could give up the game."

I shook my head. "Make us look even worse. Besides, there's glory in losing. Must solve

on. Every country remembers the battles they lost: Bunker Hill, Pearl Harbor, Gallipoli, Damascus. 'Remember the Alamo,' we still say in Texas. No survivors that fine day, Ashley. Not a one."

"Do you really think that today's game was a sublime and memorable defeat?"

"Not particularly." I poured myself another drink, not offering. "All I hope is that once oil starts flowing, everyone'll forget all about baseball. Until then, we'll just have to look bad."

He nodded, and took a seat uninvited.

"What if I said there was an alternative?"

I looked up at him.

"A way to take some of the sting out of losing. Maybe even win a few for humanity."

I emptied the glass down my throat, then slapped it to the table. "Talk."

He handed over a piece of paper. I took it carefully. Real paper was still something precious here on Tau. If you've ever moved a box of books, you know how heavy it can get. But we all had a notebook or two: the only place to store our private thoughts.

On the sheet was a list of equipment. I skimmed to the bottom and cried out at the total mass.

"Christ, Ashley, fifty kilos? La Bamba just about blew NASA's budget for the year."

"All very necessary. And I'm sure Halihunt still has some money socked away."

I sighed, nodding. Whole political parties had disappeared by underestimating the weight of oil companies. And Ashley's idea had one unmistakable advantage: It got me off the hook. I'd imagined long, luxurious days of worrying about solar arrays and oil drills instead of battling orders.

"Have you talked to Dr. Chirac about this?"

He nodded vigorously. "She's thrilled with the idea. Wants to do a comparative study of all that. But I leave convincing Mr. McGill to you."

"And you think we can win?"

He sighed. "If you insist on putting it in those narrow terms, yes. There are certain tactical advantages which I would be glad to explain."

"Spare me." I took a deep breath and nodded. "If NASA and Halihunt are game, I am. Just one thing: Do you really need the uniforms? We've got some already."

"But we have *baseball* uniforms, my dear colonel. They have *colors* on them, for God

sake. If we want the Tau to have a genuine cultural experience, we simply can't take the field anything other than all white."

"Because ...?"

He sighed, rolling his eyes. "It just wouldn't be cricket."

.....

Four days later, I visited Ashley in the field.

"No, you're supposed to be at third man!" he was yelling at Jenny Flagg. "Third man, I said! You're at fine leg! Get over to third man! Good heavens. Look, just move over to block *left field!*"

She finally nodded and jogged across the outfield.

Or perhaps it was the infield. Backfield? It was hard to tell. The two wickets were placed about twenty meters apart in the middle of the field, and there were *two* Taus batting. I seem to remember that cricket switched directions every half-dozen pitches or so. There were fielders dotted all around me, dressed in the fresh new white uniforms that had cost Pasadena its air-conditioning for three long summer nights.

As Ashley Newkirk continued his battle with field placements, I found Alex standing close to one of the batters, just to one side of the newly rolled rectangle of dirt between the wickets. She took off her helmet as I approached.

"How's it going, Captain?"

"Pretty well so far. We got their first batter—sorry, batsman—on a deflection. The one with red spots, and we got her for only twenty runs."

"*Only* twenty?"

"It's okay; they're chasing our score of three ninety, and that's just our first innings."

I shook my head.

"Bit funny playing without gloves, though," she added.

I looked around. "Hunter's got some."

"He's the wicket-keeper."

"Ah. And how come you're the only one with a helmet?"

"Because I'm at silly mid-off."

"I recognize all those words, Alex, but not in that order."

She cleared her throat. "I'm standing right next to the batsman, in case she tips it short. It's a bit dangerous if she hits it hard, which is what 'silly' means. Yoshi's at short leg on the other side. And take a look at that slips cordon."

I followed her gesture to the row of five fielders strung out behind one of the Tau batters. If only we'd thought of that for baseball: just put the fielders *behind* the batter. Any foul tip would go straight into their hands.

Of course, you can't put your fielders in foul territory. Wouldn't be baseball.

"How do the Taus like it?"

"They love it. The attendance is bigger, at least. It's the perfect sport for the Taus. You can hit the ball in any direction and score."

"So how come they aren't beating us yet?"

"Because you can't get a walk in cricket. Simple as that. And we can put fielders in position all three hundred and sixty degrees around them. The field placements are totally up to the captain, um, to Ashley. We have a chance of catching any deflection they make."

I nodded. Simple as that.

"What if they come up with something unexpected? Like their foul tipping in baseball?"

She shrugged. "Ashley says the game's been played for eight hundred years. Seems like it'd be hard to come up with any new tricks."

"Yeah, we'll see."

"Colonel, please?" Ashley had set his field, and waved me off.

I retreated to the edge of the impact crater. Alex was right. There were at least two hundred Taus around the field, raptly watching the new game. According to Dr. Chirac's first report, the aliens had decided to learn this new set of rules by more usual methods: sign language and direct example rather than passive observation. The xeno team was having its first face-to-face conversations with the Taus, pointing and miming to explain wickets and bowling and whatever the hell silly mid-off was.

A breakthrough of cosmic proportions.

Ashley had backed up to a spot about thirty meters from one wicket. He ran toward it, charging all the way up to the little wooden triptych and releasing the ball straight toward the Tau at the other wicket. The ball bounced short, flying up from the divoted ground at an unexpected angle. The Tau swung the broad, flat bat and got a piece of it. It soared over her

right shoulder, just above the cordon of fielders behind her. She started running as Jenny, placed deeper, ran it down and threw it in.

The two Taus held up their run, having changed positions once.

"Not a bad stroke, eh, Colonel?"

Iain Claymore had appeared next to me. He held one of Yoshi's cameras and a small flask.

"You understand this game?"

He looked around and lowered his voice. "My mother's from Manchester. Tell no one."

"Your secret is safe with me."

We watched another delivery. The batter clipped it, angling it away at ninety degrees, over Alex's reach and almost to the edge. The Taus ran again, switching places twice.

"Two runs, I presume?"

"Aye. They're learning to play cricket even faster than they did that daft American game."

I nodded, smiling to myself. "I just hope Ashley knows what he's in for."

"How do you mean?"

"It's not much fun to have your national game taken away from you."

Claymore lifted his head and laughed. "You Americans crack me up. Cricket, taken away from the English? Those poor bastards haven't won a cricket series in decades. The Indians, the Sri Lankans, the South Africans all kick the crap out of them on a regular basis. Christ, they were put out of the Cup by bloody *Yemen* last year."

I shook my head. "But what are they going to do when the tube opens for good, and aliens show up and beat them at their own game?"

"Ach, that happened about two hundred years ago. Only they were called Australians."

I swallowed. "It's not the same."

"Don't be daft, Colonel. The English are wankers, but at least they gave up their empire gracefully. You lot could learn something from that. They don't mind losing a friendly game against the old possessions. They don't need to win. They're just happy that two billion people on the Indian subcontinent drive on the left side of the road. It may not be much of a legacy, but it's a damn sight better than the mess that you Yanks are going to leave behind in the Middle East."

I turned to Iain with surprise. I'd never heard him say anything remotely political before, unless his relentless attacks on Ashley Newkirk's cooking counted.

"But enough of that," he said. "Let's watch the game."

.....

Of course, these days everyone on Earth has a opinion about Iain Claymore.

All those years, as we all know now, our charming half-Scot had been brewing up more than whisky in his still. Slowly and surely, he had engineered a bacterium distantly related to the ones that eat oil slicks off the ocean surface, but adapted for Tau's deep underground reserves.

For a Greenpeace radical, he was quite an interventionist. By the time we started pumping, he had infected every oil reserve within a thousand clicks of our facility. Like metal spikes driven into old-growth trees, Iain's creation made Tau crude useless for earthly consumption. No amount of retooling at our refineries back at home could save the tainted oil.

But not everyone knows what really became of him. Contrary to the official story, "St. Iain" was not executed. As a United European subject, I didn't consider him a traitor, whatever my commanders said. Besides, after all our labor and heartache on that planet, killing was good for him.

Instead, I exiled him on Tau after it was clear that the oil was useless, the array not worth maintaining, the tube closing forever on Earth's first contact era after the last of us had stepped back through. And I made sure that Claymore had all the equipment and supplies necessary for a long, lonely life on an alien planet, surrounded by a hundred thousand inhuman creatures who wanted nothing to do with him except to play a very English game.

Of course, to give him a fighting chance of staying sane, I let him keep his still.

After all the whisky I'd drunk from it, I thought that only cricket.

The End